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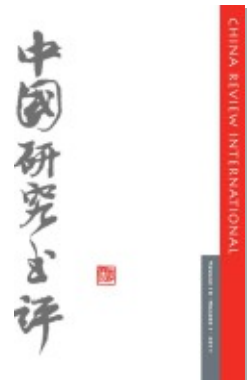
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A History of East Asia: From the Origins of Civilization to the Twenty-first Century (review)

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ventured into the gay community in Beijing as an outsider are, indeed, indispensable from her analysis.

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- NOTE 1. The latest anthology on money boys in China is Travis S. K. Kong's *Chinese Male Homosexualities: Membra, Tongzhi, and Golden Boy* (London: Routledge, 2010), which provides a full-length ethnographic account of money boys in major cities in China.



Charles Holcombe. *A History of East Asia: From the Origins of Civilization to the Twenty-first Century*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. xxiv, 430 pp. Illustrations and maps. Hardcover \$95.00, ISBN 978-0-521-51595-5. Paperback \$32.99, ISBN 978-0-521-73164-5.

Textbooks in an East Asian survey course can serve several different functions. Some texts are intended to create a context for an instructor's lectures, providing necessary information about each country's general history. This information is often accompanied by primary source excerpts, upon which supplementary class discussion may be focused. Rhoads Murphey's *East Asia: A New History*, now in its fifth edition, fits well into this category. Some textbooks are intended to challenge accepted narratives, while still providing the topical coverage of earlier accounts. Pamela Kyle Crossley's recent text on modern China *The Wobbling Pivot, China since 1800: An Interpretive History* would suit this category. Charles Holcombe's ambitious *A History of East Asia: From the Origins of Civilization to the Twenty-first Century* fits somewhere between these approaches as a work that not only covers the bases but also manages to bring fresh historiographical insights to the classroom. Textbooks are not often known for innovation and originality, but Holcombe's text significantly advances the area studies model of East Asian history first introduced by John King Fairbank, Albert Craig, and Edwin Reischauer in the field's once dominant *East Asia: Tradition and Transformation* (1973). I congratulate the author on this achievement.

Holcombe's textbook draws from recent secondary literature that addresses the weaknesses in prevailing nationalist narratives of the modern East Asian nations. These nationalist histories, often products of postcolonial efforts to find

the essence of national identity in the distant past, emphasize the unique characteristics of individual nations over longstanding cultural and historical links with other nations in the region. Contentious relations between Korea and Japan in the modern era, for example, influenced domestic scholarship in both countries on the ancient cultural ties between settlements in the Korean peninsula and the inhabitants of the islands now composing southern Japan. Depending on the political inclinations of the scholars involved, scholarship outside of China sought to downplay the sustained regional impact of various imperial-period Chinese regimes, although the Chinese writing system, Chinese style bureaucratic institutions, Confucianism, and Mahayana Buddhism were all acknowledged as widespread influences. Holcombe's account acknowledges the distinct historical origins of each modern East Asian state, while the underlying connections between the core societies of the region are properly acknowledged.

Holcombe's general approach in *A History of East Asia* is strongly interregional, and the text follows the author's own earlier work and the current trend in the field to think cross-culturally, or transnationally, even in the period prior to the emergence of the nation-state.¹ Holcombe notes the regional influence that Chinese culture, specifically the cultural norms developed in societies located on the North China plain, had on East Asia, but he reminds the reader that independent developments at the local level could be equally significant. Nonetheless, defining characteristics of social identity spread regionally, and East Asian elites had, at times, more in common with each other than they did with their own social subordinates. Holcombe does not, however, ascribe to the conventional notion that East Asian civilization developed in full on China's central plains (*zhongyuan*) and, subsequently, flowed into other parts of East Asia. There were multiple cultural cores across modern-day China, East Asia, and even Eurasia that all contributed over time to various aspects of what is now deemed "Chinese" cultural practice. As Holcombe writes, "although [ancient] Chinese civilization did develop largely indigenously, it was never entirely a closed and isolated system" (p. 30).

I have used the author's earlier work *Genesis of East Asia* several times in the classroom for my lecture survey on the early imperial period, and I am happy to see many fine elements of that work included in his textbook. In *A History of East Asia*, the author offers an excellent chapter on China's period of division, and here I would highlight his description of the northern Wei's multiple levels of cultural exchange as a pivot between East and Central Asia. Details from this section follow observations offered in *Genesis of East Asia*, but I think that the general narrative in this current work is more clearly attuned to classroom needs. The reader gains a better understanding of the cultural diversity of the northern Wei regime, which was engaged in a constant cultural dialogue between non-Han Xianbei elite and their Han Chinese subjects. Students in the United States seldom learn anything of premodern China's ethnic diversity, and Holcombe's focus on this aspect of history

is a helpful antidote. Holcombe's treatment of Buddhism's influence across the region is equally enlightening. His critique of the long-held assertion that northern dynasties in the period of division were more receptive to Buddhism due to their shared foreign origins has caused me to adjust my lectures accordingly. Elsewhere in the text, Holcombe's description of the emergence of the samurai class in Japan will intrigue students, as well as dispel some persistent misconceptions. His description of the slow emergence of this social class, along with the late development of a central ethos and the samurai's "cult of the sword" (p. 149), will surprise many American students drawn to the lecture hall by this topic alone.

Holcombe's textbook confronts many lingering misunderstandings of East Asian history in the Western classroom. In the early modern section of *A History of East Asia*, he takes on the thorny issue of periodization. Noting that the tripartite ancient-medieval-modern division of eras employed in Western history cannot be applied across all regions of East Asia, Holcombe's reference to the "diversity of local experience and the arbitrariness of our historical labels" (p. 174) is a point well taken. Holcombe addresses the "static East Asia" fallacy in this same section. The broader context for the alleged isolation of the early Ming is briefly mentioned, although Holcombe could expand his discussion here. The reference to Gunder Frank's work is helpful for students captivated by the rise of the West theories prevalent in many English-language world history texts, and the notion that European traders in Asia had entered into a preexisting global network is a wonderful topic for further classroom discussion. Qing westward imperial expansion, reflecting the work of Peter Perdue and others, is well described in this text. Japan's policy of isolation after the establishment of the Tokugawa shogunate is also aptly discussed. The late imperial historical developments particular to China, Korea, and Japan that will become defining characteristics of these modern nation-states are all explained well in this section.

In the final half of *A History of East Asia*, Holcombe covers the highlights of modern East Asian history, although the general themes of the textbook require some reworking here to fit the new context of Western involvement in the region. China, Japan, and Korea, as well as Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, all respond to European expansion differently, while the general theme of cultural appropriation and adaptation remains constant. Holcombe's description of Westernization on Chinese terms in the early Republican period complements the transnational themes that he presents earlier in the text. Students will be fascinated to learn about the different strategies adopted throughout East Asia to construct modern national identities in the face of Western imperialism. Although Holcombe devotes nearly half of the text to the modern era, some supplementary reading will likely be required for any instructor using this text for a modern survey course. I myself would not use *A History of East Asia* as my only source for such a course, but that would be asking too much from any textbook. More specifically, the book would benefit from more maps used in tandem with descrip-

tions of modern events, and the section on Singapore in the final chapter should be expanded somewhat. However, Holcombe has chosen some excellent photographs from the modern era to bring this period to life.

There are many aspects of the book that are well suited for classroom use. I find Holcombe's use of short biographical sketches to be effective in reinforcing the themes highlighted in each chapter. Nothing captivates a classroom better than a good story, but personal tales alone can be nothing but entertaining diversions, if introduced out of context. Holcombe brings personal anecdotes together with his broader points to offer his readers images, with which they may associate these occasionally complex ideas. Jack Wills's *Mountain of Fame* is a more extended version of this same pedagogical approach, although Holcombe has introduced a fresh set of lesser known historical figures. The usage of these biographical examples as a teaching tool should be exploited by all instructors who wish to reach their audience in new ways.

Given Holcombe's own conclusions in *The Genesis of East Asia*, I am somewhat perplexed about the near total omission of Vietnamese history from this textbook. In his earlier monograph, Holcombe argued for the inclusion of Vietnam within the Sinitic sphere, noting that there was "no obvious ethnic or cultural frontier dividing what is now Vietnam from other parts of the southeastern-most administrative region of the [Chinese] empire."² In *The Genesis of East Asia*, Holcombe refers exclusively to the northern half of Vietnam, but I think that this strong and valid argument still pertains in a textbook treatment of East Asia, despite the Cold War-era delineation between East and Southeast Asia. Other scholars have recently begun to push back against these rigid geographical designations, and Holcomb's own work exemplifies that trend. There may be many publisher-related reasons given for the excision of Vietnamese history from this project, but I still think that this exclusion is unfortunate.

Overall, Holcombe's *A History of East Asia* is a welcome addition to the choices instructors now have for introducing East Asian history to a new generation of undergraduates. The book's culturally oriented framework is refreshing, and its interregional themes resonate with studies of world history produced for other areas of the globe. Filled with the tales of historical characters from all walks of life, this textbook will appeal to students with multiple interests. The book has also been affordably priced by Cambridge University Press, which is no small matter in this era of academic belt tightening. Clearly written and well balanced, Holcombe's book will enlighten new readers as to the brilliance and diversity of East Asia's past for years to come.

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NOTES

1. See Charles Holcombe, *The Genesis of East Asia, 221 B.C.–A.D. 907* (Honolulu: Association for Asian Studies and University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), p. 145.
2. Holcombe, *The Genesis of East Asia*, p. 145.



Max Ko-wu Huang. *The Meaning of Freedom: Yan Fu and the Origins of Chinese Liberalism*. Foreword by Thomas A. Metzger. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2008. 408 pp. Hardcover \$64.95, ISBN 978-9-629-96278-4.

Yan Fu (1854–1921) was a pivotal Chinese thinker and translator of great influence in the intellectual history of China. He was responsible for introducing modern Western thought into China's intellectual discourse through his translations, but Max Huang's volume is no mere intellectual biography. In that he deals with a multitude of complex issues with nuance and subtlety, this multifaceted work of intellectual history is not easily characterized or summarized. His major argument is that Yan Fu's thought had a basic continuity with Chinese tradition that decisively shaped his understanding and misunderstandings of the European books he translated and commented upon. Therefore, unlike the still common image of a Yan as someone who rejected his Confucian core heritage in favor of a worldview based primarily on Western values, Huang sees a Yan whose ever-vital Confucian (and Daoist) heritage was a (or *the*) fundamental part of a new worldview that also incorporated Western values.

The book might also be characterized as an expansion and elaboration in both scope and methodology of Huang's previous Chinese-language books on Liang Qichao and on Yan Fu. This English-language book incorporates and strengthens their arguments excellently. For instance, fundamental to Huang's book on Liang Qichao¹ is the distinction between *transformative* and *accommodative* thinking, developed and utilized by his mentor Thomas A. Metzger.² In modern China, this is similar to the distinction between the utopian revolutionary and gradualist reformist traditions. The epitome of the former would be Mao Zedong and of the latter would be, perhaps, Liang Qichao, the founder of the twentieth-century reformist accommodative approach. Huang submitted that twentieth-century mainstream intellectuals tended toward the former, while rejecting the latter. Recapitulating his interpretation of Liang (pp. 42–45) in *The Meaning of Freedom*, Huang links this distinction with that of Rousseauian revolutionary tradition and the liberalist tradition of John Stuart Mill, one of the classic European thinkers whose works Yan translated. Yan himself advocated an accommodative, gradualist approach. Huang claims that Millian liberalism failed in China because of these